

Isabel Toral-Niehoff

# Justice and Good Administration in Medieval Islam: The Book of the Pearl of the Ruler by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (860 – 940)

The eyes rise up to a just ruler  
With awe, for he can help, and he can harm.  
And if you catch a glimpse of him,  
you see signs of clemency and of frightful might.<sup>1</sup>

تسمو العيون الى امام عادل  
وترى عليه اذا العيون لمحنه  
معطى المهابة نافع ضرار  
سيما الحليم وهيبة الجبار

## Introduction

What were the qualities ascribed to the good ruler in medieval<sup>2</sup> Islam and how is he depicted? Which examples were used to illustrate the adequate behaviour of a monarch and what was the ruler’s expected relationship to his entourage – ministers, counsellors and family?

The Arabic textual tradition includes a wealth of texts on political theory and good government that can serve as source basis to answer these questions. In fact, the question of who rules has been critical in Islamic history since its beginnings, and disagreement on this subject has been the cause of numerous conflicts, the first one taking place immediately after the death of the Prophet in 632 CE when the community disagreed on his succession.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, writings dealing with the

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1 The poem is attributed to the Umayyad poet al-Akhṭal and addresses the caliph Mu‘āwīya b. Sufyān (reg. 661–680 CE). Aḥmad Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihī, *Kitāb al-‘Iqd al-farīd*, 7 vols., ed. Aḥmad Amīn and Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī (Beirut, ed. 1990), I, 55; Aḥmad Ibn-‘Abd-Rabbihī and Issa J. Boullata, *The Unique Necklace: = al-‘Iqd al-farīd*. Translated by Professor Issa J. Boullata. Reviewed by Roger M.A. Allen, Great books of Islamic civilization (Reading, 2007); vol.1, 29.

2 For a better understanding, I will use (the otherwise debatable) epithet “Medieval” to indicate that I am referring to the period between c. 650 and 1200 CE, leaving aside the problems of the application of a European chronology to Islamic History.

3 The Prophet, who died without living male offspring, did not provide clear succession rules, an uncertainty that caused the first so-called Civil War between ‘Alī and Mu‘āwīya (658–661 CE). As a matter of fact, succession crises were very frequent in Medieval Islamic history. Although normally ruled by dynasties, (male) primogeniture never became a rule in Islamic polities, and the prevalence of polygyny and the legitimacy of male descendants from concubines could multiply dangerously the number of potential successors. Women were excluded from political rule, though could be very influential. The most frequent system to guarantee some stability became designation. For succession rules in Early Islam, see Jens Scheiner, “Monarchische Aspekte frühislamischer Herrschaft”, in *Monarchische Herrschaft im Altertum*, ed. Stefan Rebenich, Schriften des Historischen Kollegs Kolloquien (Berlin, Boston, 2017), 578–81.

quality of the legitimate and good ruler, his appropriate conduct, and the effective organisation of government, abound in the vast ocean of medieval Arabic and Persian literature. They appear disseminated in a multiplicity of textual genres, such as treatises on ethics and political philosophy, mirrors of princes, advice literature, administration handbooks, legal books, historiography, literary anthologies and encyclopaedias. Since all these texts were developed by various social groups, they reflect diverse perspectives on the topic: whether that of the clerical class of administrators (*kuttāb*) and courtiers, the schools of legal scholars (*‘ulamā’*), theologians (*mutakallimūn*) or the circles of philosophers (*falāsifa*).<sup>4</sup>

Despite differences, readers familiar with the Christian and Jewish political traditions will encounter many well-known features. Several of these are the result of borrowings, adaptations and cultural exchanges between the entangled histories of these three cultures and religions, but others go back to the development on the same substrate, namely the Near Eastern late antique setting.

First, medieval Islamic political thought considered monarchy as the most recommendable form of human organisation and thus saw the persona of the monarch as the convergent focus and warrant of societal order.<sup>5</sup> To medieval Muslims, the rule of one seemed the most effective and stable form of government and the best means to avoid anarchy – a terrible state that was either associated with *jāhiliyya*,<sup>6</sup> the abhorrent time of tribal paganism before the advent of the Prophet Muḥammad, or with the terrible *fitna*, “trial” or “schism” of the community. The establishment of authority was considered a natural necessity for humans as social beings; however, according to Islamic political theory, the power of the legitimate ruler should be limited by moral and ethical boundaries. Thus, he was expected to follow appropriate rules of conduct and listen to his advisors and/or counsellors, which could open the door to informal modes of political participation.<sup>7</sup>

Another common feature to all three traditions is the way religion – traditionally the most powerful means to justify the rule of the one over the many in pre-modern times – was utilised to provide political legitimacy. In a monotheistic system like Islam, the sacralisation of the ruler himself is to be excluded,<sup>8</sup> and only God with

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<sup>4</sup> The best survey on political thought in Islam is still the book Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic political thought*, [New ed.], The new Edinburgh Islamic surveys (Edinburgh, 2005); cf. also Gerhard Böwering, Mahan Mirza and Patricia Crone, eds., *The Princeton encyclopedia of Islamic political thought* (Princeton, NJ, 2013) and Gerhard Böwering, ed., *Islamic political thought: An introduction* (Princeton, NJ, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Scheiner (cf. fn. 3).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. “Djähiliyya” (ed.) *EI<sup>2</sup>*, L. Gardet, “Fitna”, *EI<sup>2</sup>*.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to the need of informal advice (*naṣiḥa*), a pervasive theme in mirrors, and not to the principle of formal consultation (*shūrā*), which is a much-debated issue among modern Islamic legal scholars. For further discussion, see Böwering (2015 cf. fn. 4) 71–73.

<sup>8</sup> For the sacralisation of the monarch in Antiquity, see Stefan Rebenich and Johannes Wienand. Monarchische Herrschaft im Altertum. Zugänge und Perspektiven, in Stefan Rebenich, ed., *Monar-*

His infinite mercy and power could serve as source of legitimacy. Hence originated the theory – rooted in the late antique idea of monotheistic kingship – that God directly bestowed the monarch with authority.<sup>9</sup> The tension between the necessary humanity of the ruler and the enhancement of his persona as symbol of societal and political order, however, remained palpable.

The following study attempts to address the core questions of this volume by making a contextualised study of the *Book of the Pearl of the Ruler* by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (860–940 CE),<sup>10</sup> an exemplary text that has enjoyed a broad reception across the centuries.<sup>11</sup> The book is particularly interesting in the context of the transcultural and transepochoal approach of this volume, since it is credited as one of the earliest examples of Arabic mirrors of princes, a genre that consists of advice to rulers and their executives on politics, statecraft and the conduct of warfare, diplomacy and espionage.<sup>12</sup> Mirrors are the only genre of Islamic political writings that would find noteworthy reception in the European West, especially in Castile,<sup>13</sup> and they have also served as an important conduit for the introduction and adaptation of pre-Islamic (Indian, Persian and Greek) wisdom into Islamic thought, thus functioning as a channel for intercultural exchange.<sup>14</sup>

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*chische Herrschaft im Altertum*, Schriften des Historischen Kollegs Kolloquien (Berlin, Boston, 2017), 1–20, esp. 10–12.

**9** For commentary on monotheistic kingship and related discussions, see János M. Bak, ed., *Monotheistic kingship: The medieval variants; [... annual interdisciplinary workshop of the Department of Medieval Studies at Central European University ... in February 2002]*, Pasts incorporated v. 3 (Budapest, 2004); see also Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, [ACLS Humanities E-Book edition] (Princeton, N.J., 1993); Almut Höfert, *Kaisertum und Kalifat: Der imperiale Monotheismus im Früh- und Hochmittelalter*, Globalgeschichte 21 (Frankfurt am Main, 2015); Wolfram Drews, *Die Karolinger und die Abbasiden von Bagdad: Legitimationsstrategien frühmittelalterlicher Herrscherdynastien im transkulturellen Vergleich*, Europa im Mittelalter 12 (Berlin, 2009).

**10** Isabel Toral-Niehoff, “The ‘Book of the Pearl of the Ruler’ in the Unique Necklace by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih: Preliminary Remarks”, in *Global medieval: Mirrors for princes reconsidered*, ed. Regula Forster and Nequín Yavari, Ilex Foundation series 15 (Cambridge, MA, 2015) 134–50.

**11** More than 100 mss. of the work survive along with frequent quotations in other writings. Cf. Walter Werkmeister, *Quellenuntersuchungen zum Kitāb al-‘Iqd al-farīd des Andalusiers Ibn ‘Abdrabbih: (246/860–328/949) ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*, Islamkundliche Untersuchungen Bd. 70 (Berlin, 1983) 27–43, 71–79.

**12** For the genre in pre-modern Arabic and Persian literature and the problems in definition, see L. Marlow (a), “Surveying Recent Literature on the Arabic and Persian Mirrors for Princes Genre”, *History Compass* 7, no. 2 (2009); Louise Marlow (b), “Advice and Advice Literature”, in *EP*.

**13** Adeline Rucquoy and Hugo O. Bizzarri, “Los Espejos de Príncipes en Castilla entre Oriente y Occidente,” *Cuadernos de Historia de España* 79 (2005) 7–30. For a survey of studies on mirrors in a comparative perspective, see Regula Forster and Nequín Yavari, eds., *Global medieval: Mirrors for princes reconsidered*, Ilex Foundation series 15 (Cambridge, MA, 2015); see also Linda Darling, “Mirrors for Princes in Europe and the Middle East: A Case of Historiographical Incommensurability”, in *East meets West in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. A. Classen (Berlin 2013) 223–43.

**14** Marlow (b, cf. fn. 12), Dimitri Gutas, “The Greek and Persian Background of Early Arabic Encyclopedism”, in *Organizing knowledge: Encyclopaedic activities in the pre-eighteenth century Islamic world*,

## Historical context

The *Book of the Pearl of the Ruler*<sup>15</sup> forms the first section of the all-encompassing multithemed encyclopaedia entitled *The Unique Necklace*, which was composed during the caliphal period in Andalusia at the beginning of the tenth century, in the first decades of the newly founded Umayyad caliphate (founded 929 CE).<sup>16</sup> The caliphal context is important, since it marks a time when legitimizing discourses for the new regime became particularly relevant.<sup>17</sup> The author, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, was a cultivated member of the ruling elite at the court. He was a litterateur and panegyric poet from a local family whose members had been clients of the ruling Umayyad dynasty since the late eighth century. The general program of the *Necklace* is to provide the reader with all wisdom, knowledge, ethics and courtly etiquette that a cultivated, well-educated urban *homo islamicus* was supposed to know, i.e., a survey of *adab*.<sup>18</sup> The rules of good government must have occupied an eminent place in this curriculum of the ideal courtier, since the *Book of the Pearl of the Ruler* heads the collection. It is followed by books dealing with related subjects like warfare and diplomacy, which together form the first thematic cluster of the *Necklace*.

## Exempla

As typical *adab* encyclopaedia, the *Necklace* is not an argumentative, systematically structured text. In fact, the title is not only ornamental, but is to be understood as a metaphor alluding to the organisational principle. The *Necklace* is arranged as a “col-

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ed. Gerhard Endress and Abdou Filali-Ansary, *Islamic philosophy, theology, and science* v. 61 (Leiden, Boston, 2006) 91–101 and Seyed S. Haghghat, “Persian Mirrors for Princes: Pre-Islamic and Islamic Mirrors Compared”, in *Global medieval: Mirrors for princes reconsidered*, ed. Regula Forster and Nequin Yavari, *Ilex Foundation series* 15 (Cambridge, MA, 2015) 83–93.

<sup>15</sup> *Kitāb al-Lu’lu’ fi sultān*. Regarding the difficulties of translating *sultān*, v.i.

<sup>16</sup> The Umayyad emir in Cordoba ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣir proclaimed the caliphate in 929, thus challenging and confronting the parallel Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad and the Fatimid caliphate in Cairo. For the ideology of these “second” Umayyads, in contrast to the “first” in Syria, see Janina M. Safran, *The second Umayyad Caliphate: The articulation of caliphal legitimacy in al-Andalus*, *Harvard Middle Eastern monographs* 33 (Cambridge, MA, 2000). For the *Necklace* in general, see Werkmeister, *Quellenuntersuchungen zum Kitāb al-Iqd al-farīd des Andalusiers Ibn ‘Abdrabbih*; Vegliason Elías de Molins, Josefina, *El collar único, de Ibn Abd Rabbih*, *Historia de la literatura universal Obras* 39 (Madrid, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> For the importance of the caliphal context, see Isabel Toral-Niehoff, “History in Adab Context: ‘The Book on Caliphal Histories’ by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (246/860–328/940)”, *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015) 61–85; Isabel Toral-Niehoff, “Writing for the caliphate – the Unique Necklace by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (860–940). Some proposals.” *Usur al-Wusta* (2018) 80–95.

<sup>18</sup> J. Hämeen-Anttila, “Adab, early developments” in *EP*, S. A. Bonebakker, “Adab and the concept of belles-lettres,” in ‘Abbasid belles-lettres, ed. Julia Ashtiany, *The Cambridge history of Arabic literature* (Cambridge, 2008), 16–30.

lar of pearls of wisdom” or chain of authoritative exempla and sayings, namely small narrative units, maxims, aphorisms, poems or sayings put in the mouth of diverse authorities and arranged according to thematic clusters that follow a hierarchy of importance. Excepting short introductory and programmatic paratexts, the author Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih adopts the role of a mere compiler of valuable material of the past. This interweaving of authorial perspectives is a frequent feature in mirrors of princes;<sup>19</sup> and as a literary strategy, it served to distance the author from the advice he was giving by transferring authorial responsibility to the speakers he compiled. Anyway, it must be stressed that polyphony is a typical feature of medieval Arabic literature.<sup>20</sup>

Besides several Quranic quotations and prophetic utterances and traditions (hadith), most of these exempla and wise sayings are attributed to emblematic personalities of Islamic history that are well-known from parallel works in the Islamic East (caliphs, governors, companions of the Prophet).<sup>21</sup> However, as it is typical for mirrors of princes, many of the reported traditions in the *Book* are attributed to non-Islamic and authorities of non-Arabic origin. The pre-Islamic Persian tradition stands out among these, which draws on the rich advice-literature of Sasanian origin that was translated into Arabic in the early Islamic centuries. These include the widely disseminated “Testament of Ardashīr” and the “Book of the Crown” by Pseudo al-Jāhīz, as well as books with an Indian background, as the “Kalīla wa-Dimna.” Therefore, we frequently find in the *Book of the Pearl of the Ruler* Persian personalities like Kings Ardashīr, Khosrow Anūshirwān and Khosrow Parvīz, and the “Indian kings.”<sup>22</sup> The *Book* also includes some Hellenistic traditions stemming from the circle of *gnomologia* and Pseudo-Aristotelica, such as the apocryphal epistles from Aristotle to Alexander,<sup>23</sup> as well as sayings attributed to Plato, Solomon, David and the Negus

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**19** Marlow (a, cf. fn. 12) 530. According to Heribert Busse, “Fürstenspiegel und Fürstenethik im Islam,” *Bustan* 9 (1968), 17, it was a strategy that allowed the author to distance himself from the advice he was conveying to his royal recipient. He also observes a similar anthology-like character in European mirrors.

**20** Lale Behzadi, “The concept of Polyphony and the Author’s Voice,” in *Concepts of authorship in pre-modern Arabic texts*, ed. Lale Behzadi and Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, Bamberger Orientstudien Band 7, 9–22.

**21** E.g. the Rightly-Guided caliphs Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī; Umayyads like Mu‘āwiya and ‘Abd al-Malik, Abbasids like al-Manṣūr and Hārūn al-Rashīd, but also famous governors like Ziyād b. Abīhi and al-Ḥajjāj. Normally, they are just mentioned by name; obviously, the reader was supposed to recognise them immediately. All of them were well known, and most of the anecdotes and sayings that circulated widely in the Arabic world of the time are to be found elsewhere, too.

**22** For the Persian component, see the references in note 14. All three Sasanian rulers are familiar personalities to the medieval Arabic reader and frequent personalities in the above-mentioned Persian traditions.

**23** For these Pseudo-Aristotelica in East and West, see Regula Forster, *Das Geheimnis der Geheimnisse: Die arabischen und deutschen Fassungen des pseudo-aristotelischen Sīr al-asrār, Secretum secretorum, Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter* 43 (Wiesbaden, 2006). For the political traditions of Greek origin, cf. Crone, *Medieval Islamic political thought*, 165–96; for the *gnomologia*, cf. Dimitri Gutas,

of Ethiopia. In sum, like the majority of the early “mirrors,” the Islamic quality of the *Book of the Pearl of the Ruler* is scarcely manifest, to the degree that it rather resembles a work of (transcultural) universal wisdom literature.

## Denominations

As is the rule in medieval Arabic literature, the *Book* does not resort to loan words when referring to monarchs but draws from a well-established Arabic terminology and conceptualisation. The most frequent terms in the books are *ṣultān* (for a nuanced translation of this term, see my remarks below) and *imām* (“supreme political and religious leader”) and, occasionally, *malik* (“king”). *Khalīfa* (“caliph”), in contrast, is never used in this book, although it appears in the historical sections of the *Necklace*.<sup>24</sup>

*Sultān* is the key term and appears in the title of the book (*Kitāb al-lu’lu’ fī l-sultān*). However, the appropriate translation poses several problems. According to the most extended use, *sultān* is a denomination that began to be used in the eleventh century for provincial and even petty rulers who had assumed *de facto* power alongside the caliph. From then onwards, the title became more and more institutionalised, even appearing in coinage and official inscriptions,<sup>25</sup> and in this sense it became part of the theories about the sultanate, which stated that sultans had received their power from the caliph by delegation. This meaning also underlies the English “sultan.” *Sultān* also has a much broader meaning in the context of literary texts, and this is also the case in the *Book of the Pearl of the Ruler*. Here, it can be either understood as an abstract (verbal) noun derived from the root *s.l.ṭ* (to dominate, rule) meaning “political power, authority,” or it is used in a metonymic way, designating the “holder of political power, authority; person who embodies this power.” In the *Book of the Pearl of the Ruler* we find both uses, which explains why it is necessary to determine the correct translation from case to case. This semantic ambiguity makes it also difficult to separate those qualities, faults, and merits attributed to the ruler as persona, and those that are generally associated with “political authority.”

The second key term in the *Book* is *imām*, “supreme leader,” whose meaning roughly overlaps with that of caliph (see below), but with stronger religious conno-

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*Greek Wisdom Literature in Arabic Translation: A study of the Graeco-Arabic Gnomologia* (New Haven, 1975) and Gutas (cf. fn. 14).

<sup>24</sup> See Toral-Niehoff (2015, cf. fn. 17), where I analyse book 15, dedicated to caliphs.

<sup>25</sup> For the sultanate in the context of traditional Islamic thinking, see H.J. Kramers [C. Bosworth] Art. “Sultān”, in *IEP*. Consulted online on 25 September 2018; see also Böwering, G. “Introduction” in Gerhard Böwering, ed., *Islamic political thought: An introduction* (Princeton, NJ, 2015), 1–23 and Crone, P. “Traditional Politic Thought”, in Gerhard Böwering, ed., *Islamic political thought: An introduction* (Princeton, NJ, 2015), 237–38.

tations. It appears especially in the *Book* in those sections that emphasise the moral duties of the ruler. In contrast, the term caliph (*khalīfa*) – the current denomination for the only legitimate sovereign and leader of all Muslims – is not used in the *Book*, though it appears elsewhere in the *Necklace*, particularly in Book 15 on caliphal histories.<sup>26</sup> Probably, *sultān* seemed more suitable in a section discussing political authority as concept, as is the case in the *Book*, and *imām* served also better when discussing the moral duties of the ruler than caliph.

Another denomination we find is *malik* (“king”), which is the Arabic expression used for monarchs in the pre-Islamic past. Since it has the connotation of illegitimate, barbaric rule, it was abandoned in Islamic times, but was still in use for non-Muslim monarchs,<sup>27</sup> and is so used in the *Book*. Other terms for political power-holders are *amīr* (mostly military commander), *wazīr* (minister), *ḥājib* (chancellor) and *walī* (governor),<sup>28</sup> but these always imply some state of suzerainty.

There is no close equivalent in medieval Islam to the European distinction between emperor and king, which ultimately has roots in Roman imperial history. Here, the main line goes between the universal caliph(ate)<sup>29</sup> and the local sultan(ate) or *de facto* ruler. It is a dichotomy that developed gradually over time, and the interrelationship between the caliph and sultan has received much attention by Muslim thinkers in the past, who conceive of it in terms of delegation.<sup>30</sup> The universal claim of the caliphate has some parallels with the idea of *imperium*; however, the caliphate draws legitimacy from other principles and is, at least in theory, more absolute, even though, in practice, caliphs have only possessed actual power for short periods in history.<sup>31</sup>

The following sections will offer a brief analysis of some of the “pearls” of wisdom found in the *Book*. This short insight into some of the wisdom compiled by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih will help us better understand how the concept of the good ruler was developed by the *Book*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Toral-Niehoff (2015, cf. fn. 17).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Böwering (2015, cf. fn. 4) and Scheiner (cf. fn. 3) 569–72.

<sup>28</sup> Later, non-Arabic terms like *khān* (mostly for Turkish and Mongol rulers) and *shāh* (used in Iranian contexts) came into use.

<sup>29</sup> In official allocutions, documents and coinage, caliphs (arab. *khalīfa*) often bear the title of *amīr al-mu‘minīn* “Commander of the Faithful.” Frequently, the caliph is also addressed as *imām* (v.s.).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Kadi, Wadad, Shahin, Aram A. “caliph, caliphate” in Böwering, Mirza and Crone (2013, cf. fn. 4) 81–86 and Crone, P. “Traditional Politic Thought”, in Gerhard Böwering, ed., *Islamic political thought: An introduction* (Princeton, NJ, 2015), 237–38.

<sup>31</sup> The Umayyads in Damascus (661–750), the Abbasids in Baghdad (750 until c. 900), the Fatimids (909 until c. 1100) and the Umayyads in Cordoba (929–1030).



## Definition and Necessity of Authority

First, *sulṭān* is necessary for humankind, since it guarantees societal order, security and enables a civilised life. God, in His infinite mercy, has provided *sulṭān* to His servants as protection, particularly for the weak that need shelter and justice. A very frequent metaphor is that of the ruler as God's shadow:

Ruling power (*sulṭān*) is the rein (*zimām*) of all things. It/he organizes rights, maintains punishments (*ḥudūd*), and is the hub around which religious and secular matters turn. It is God's protection of His country, and His shadow stretching over His servants. Through it, their wives are secure, their oppressors are deterred, and their frightened are safe. (Text I, 20 / Translation, 5)<sup>32</sup>

There can be no ruler without men, and there can be no men without wealth, and there can be no wealth without civilization, and there can be no civilization without justice. (Text I, 49 / Translation, 24)

Another key idea is that of the mutual dependency between the ruler and the ruled in Islam, that they are useless without each other:

Islam, the ruler, and the people are like a tent, a pole, and pegs. The tent is Islam, the pole is the ruler, and the pegs are the people. Each is useful only with the others. (Text I, 22 / Translation, 6)

## Advice – The Bond between Ruler and Ruled

This idea of the necessity, even of the duty of cooperation between the various parts of society for the appropriate maintenance of social order and harmony feeds into the significance of advice, both for the ruler (who should accept advice) and the ruled (who are expected, even obliged to give advice).

The wise men have said: The king is useless without his ministers and helpers; and the ministers and helpers are useless without affection and advice; and affection and advice are useless without good opinion and integrity. (Text I, 48 / Translation, 23)

However, advising can be a risky undertaking for the ruled, who might provoke with unpleasant critique the anger and wrath of the ruler. Therefore, it requires wisdom, tolerance, and knowledge on the part the ruler, and courage, integrity, delicacy and supreme sensibility on the part of the advisor:

In an Indian book, a story is told about a man who entered the presence of one of their kings. He said: "O king, advising you is a duty required of the lowly little person as well as the important great one. If it were not for my confidence in the virtue of your mind and your tolerance of what

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<sup>32</sup> "Text" refers in the following quotations to the standard edition Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi, *Kitāb al-'Iqd al-farīd*, "Translation" to Ibn-'Abd-Rabbihi and Boullata, *The Unique Necklace*.



may be disagreeable to hear and accept in the interest of the common people and in consideration for the elite, it would be rash of me to say anything. But if we realise that our continued existence is related to yours, and that our lives are dependent upon you, even if you do not ask us to do it. It is said, 'He who withholds his advice from the ruler, who conceals his illness from the physicians, and who keeps secret his inner feelings from friends will hurt himself.' I know that any speech that is unpleasant to hear is not said to anyone unless the one who says it has trust in the mind of the people addressed; for if the latter is wise, he will tolerate it, because its benefit is to the person who listens and not to the one who says it. O king, you are the one who has the virtue of intelligence and the sophistication of knowledge. This encourages me to tell you what you do not like, fully confident in the fact that you value my advice and that I prefer you to my own self." (Text I, 23 / Translation, 7)

Because of the danger of annoying the ruler with critique, it is recommended that the advisor resort to indirect, allusive communication:

They said "he who is associated with the ruler should not withhold advice from him even if the ruler finds it annoying. However, his speech to him should be kind, not stupidly unthoughtful, so that he may inform him of his fault without saying it to his face. He should rather speak proverbially and tell him of the fault of others so that he may know his own fault." (Text I, 31 / Translation, 12)

It is not surprising that the *Book* enhances the ruler's forbearance with men of religion and virtue on their being audacious with him and mentions several anecdotes where famous rulers feature exactly this virtue (Text I, 76 / Translation, 40).

## Good Administration and the Reign's Welfare

Since the ruler had been bestowed with his power by God to serve as protector of his subjects, he is supposed to fulfil several requirements and behave in an appropriate way to accomplish his task. First, he is expected to care for the welfare and satisfaction of his subjects by means of a good administration:

Therefore, it is incumbent upon him whom God has invested with the reins (*azimma*) of His rule (*ḥukm*), whom He has made sovereign over the affairs of His creatures, whom He has specially favoured with His beneficence, and whom He has firmly appointed to wield power (*sulṭān*) – it is incumbent upon him to care seriously about his subjects' interests, and to pay attention to the welfare (*marāfiq*) of the people obedient to him, in accordance with the honour that God has conferred upon him and the conditions of happiness (*asbāb al-sa'āda*) He has bestowed upon him. (Text I, 20 / Translation, 5)

Therefore, he must care for the welfare of his subjects, also in terms of economy, because "if a fountain is good, its streams are good too" (Text I, 43 / Translation, 20). In other words: "the well-being of the subjects depends on the well-being of their leader (*Ṣilāḥ al-ra'īya bi-ṣilāḥ al-imām*)." (Text I, 37 / Translation, 16)

Among the practical capacities and qualities of the ruler that are mentioned as important for a good administration are, on the one hand, decisiveness and determina-

tion, and on the other, the capacity of making a good choice in the election of officials and judges. Both aspects are discussed in several subchapters that contain many anecdotes and positive and negative exempla to illustrate how other rulers acted in this regard.

A king who had been stripped of his monarchy was asked: “How did you lose your monarchy?” He said, “Postponing today’s work until tomorrow, seeking one particular aim by losing many others, and rewarding every man deceived by his own intellect. The man deceived by his own intellect is one who has reached a rank he does not deserve or who has been given a reward he does not merit.” (Text I, 60 / Translation, 32)

## Justice (*‘adāla*)

The key component for good administration is justice (*‘adāla*). This does not only refer to a personal quality of the ruler – rather, it is essential that the ruler’s justice is also seen and felt by the subjects to maintain authority and societal order. In other words, to function as connecting factor, the ruler’s justice needs to be practiced, represented and made known. Furthermore, perceived fairness is crucial – the ruler must be overtly judged by the same criteria as his subjects, and he must know his limits like all other humans:

The wise said: Among the duties of a ruler is to be just in his seen deeds in order to preserve the well-being of his rule, and to be just in his own conscience in order to preserve the well-being of his religion. If his administration is corrupt, his ruling power is gone. All politics revolves around justice and fairness, and no rule can last without them, be it one of believers or of unbelievers; this is in addition to organization of state affairs and placing them in their right places. He who rules should let himself be judged by his subjects, and the subjects should let themselves be judged by the ruler. A ruler’s judgement on others should be akin to his judgement of himself, for rights are known only by him who knows their limits and their correct places. No person can be a ruler unless he was a subject earlier. (Text I, 38 / Translation, 16)

This broad understanding of justice is not determined by the application of law, but signifies the ruler’s capacity to practice an equilibrated, moderate and fair judgment and bring balance where there is inequality, a notion which reveals a strong influence from Persian models.<sup>33</sup>

When rulers administer justice, they must be equanimous, graceful, moderate and calm:

A king said: I do not joke when I promise or threaten, and when I command or forbid. I do not punish on being angered. I appoint the capable, and I reward for good service done and not for emotional reasons. In people’s hearts I strike awe which is unmixed with hatred, affection which

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<sup>33</sup> Ann K.S. Lambton, “Justice in the Medieval Persian Theory of Kingship”, *SI* 17 (1962), and Böwering (2015, cf. fn. 4) 91–119.

is unmixed with brazen audacity. I make foodstuffs available and I prevent hoarding. (Text I, 39 / Translation, 17)

Choose truth, abide by moderation, implement justice, be kind to the subjects, and know that the most just is he who gives them justice against himself, and that the most unjust is he who wrongs people for the sake of others. (Text I, 47 / Translation, 22)

The importance of the ruler's obligation to exercise proper conduct, moderation and clemency is a direct consequence of his position of power: The ruler must be aware of his powerfulness, and act according to the responsibility and dignity of his role:

Know that one from you can shed blood and another can spare it, that your wrath is an unsheathed sword over the one with whom you are angry, that your blessing is an abundant blessing to the one with whom you are satisfied, and that your command is effective as soon as you express it. Therefore, be cautious when angry lest your words be wrong, lest your color change, and lest your body shake. For kings punish with resoluteness, and pardon with clemency. (Text I, 47 / Translation, 19)

When the ruler practices justice, he must seek to satisfy the majority and leave aside the minority opinions and interests of the unsatisfied, whose existence is unavoidable anyway.

It is unusual for the flock (*al-ra'īya*) to be satisfied with the leaders (*a'imma*), to find no facile excuse for them, and to blame them when many a blamed person may be innocent. There is no way one can be safe from the (biting) tongues of the common people (*alsunat al-'amma*), for the satisfaction of everyone (*riḍā al-jumla*) and the agreement of all (*muwāfiqat jimā'atihā*) are among impossible and unattainable things. Everyone has his share of justice and his place in government. It is the duty of the leader (*imām*) to rule his people by deeds that satisfy the majority. (Text I, 21 / Translation, 6)

Justice thus means the preservation of social harmony, and, in consequence, the ruler is recommended not to exaggerate the exposure and persecution of misdeeds among the ruled, and should accept the (maybe only) apparent acquiescence of his subjects without further investigation, unless their dissatisfaction is overtly revealed:

And it is the right of the ruled that their leader should accept their apparent obedience (*ḥusn al-qubūl li-zāhir ṭā'atih*) and turn away from disclosing their misdeeds. It is just as Ziyād said when he came to Iraq as a ruler: "O people, there were grudges and hostilities between you and me. I have put all that behind me and underfoot. He who has done good deeds, let him increase them; and he who has done bad deeds, let him desist from them. If I know that someone among you hates me to high heaven, I will not expose him unless he reveals his innermost to me." (Text I, 21 / Translation, 6)

## Humility and Modesty

Humility among the powerful was generally seen as an important virtue, and as key factor to increase the awe the mighty inspire. Actually, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih dedicates a whole section to this topic under the heading “the ruler’s awe is his humility” (Text I, 52 / Translation, 26), which encompasses three pages in the current edition.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705 CE) said that

The most virtuous man is one who is humble when he is in a high rank, who restrains himself when he is powerful, and who is fair when he is strong.” (Text I, 52 / Translation, 26)

Most quotations are poems that praise and recommend the virtue of humility among rulers:

If you would like to find the noblest of all people,  
Look then at a king in the clothes of a poor man (Text I, 53 / Translation, 27)

The key argument in this text, composed in a courtly environment, is less religious or moral, since the numerous quotations of praising poems rather appeal to the representative function of the ruler. This might be surprising, since humility, self-restraint and modesty (*tawāḍu’* and *taqwā’*) is regarded until nowadays as an essential virtue for any pious and God-fearing Muslim<sup>35</sup> and as particularly meritorious among powerful people, suspects of being prone to indulge in their superior position. This text, however, does not resort to these well-known arguments but reflects a rather pragmatic perspective. One could even say that it suggests that a ruler should be modest to deserve praise and so to awe the ruled to strengthen his authority. In other words, like in the case of justice, the ruler’s humility has to be known and perceived by his subjects to serve its purpose.

## Qualities of the Ruled

As stated above, the main duties of the ruled were to give advice to the ruler and be obedient to the powerholders.

The latter has been discussed above as the main bond that linked the ruler with his immediate entourage. Regarding obedience, the *Book* refers to the common Qu-ranic reference, namely Q 4:59.

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<sup>34</sup> Text I, 52–55 / Translation 26–29.

<sup>35</sup> Hsu, Shiu-Sian Angel, “Modesty”, in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. Consulted online on 25 September 2018.

O you who believe, obey God, obey God, obey the Prophet, and those in power among you (Text I, 22 / Translation, 6)

The qualities of the ruler's associate were first, as already mentioned, delicacy in the sensible formulation of advice or, in other words, manipulative finesse and sophisticated skills in allusive and indirect communication. Second, he should not be blatantly ambitious and never seek a position but wait until he is elected by the sovereign. The desirable humble and unambitious attitude of selected officials became a very frequent topos in Arabic literature. There are numerous stories about famous judges and ministers who first declined an appointment and then had to be asked several times or even searched for since they had escaped. On the one hand, rulers seem to have expected this attitude, and the book teaches the rulers to mistrust those who are manifestly ambitious:

'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb wanted to appoint a man to a ruling position, but the man hastened to ask for it. Umar said: "By God, I intended you for it, but one who asks for such a matter is not suited to have it." (Text I, 35 / Translation, 15)

On the other, one could understand the *Book* as recommending acting with (at least apparent?) humbleness to increase career chances:

Run away from honor and it will follow you; seek death, and life will be abundantly given to you. (Text I, 35–36 / Translation, 15)

The Christians say: No man is elected to the position of Catholicos but one who is not interested in it and does not seek it. (Text I, 36 / Translation, 15)

Finally, besides general qualification, the main other desirable qualities of the ruler's associate are discretion and loyalty.

## Conclusion

According to the *Book*, the monarchy symbolised the divine order, and it was God who had bestowed the ruler with authority, which implied the obligation to protect his subjects and to care for their welfare by good administration and wise selection of officials and advisors. The key component of the legitimate ruler's authority was justice, in the sense of the balancing of inequality, having an equilibrated and fair judgment, and pursuing the satisfaction of the needs of the majority of the ruled. Furthermore, it was desirable that the ruler was decisive, clement, good-mannered and humble, and it was important that these qualities were well-known among his subjects to increase their respect, awe and acceptance. The ruled, on the other hand, were expected to be obedient, discrete, qualified, unambitious and humble. Furthermore, rulers and ruled needed each other, and the sheltering umbrella was Islam and God.

The primary bond that connected the ruler and his subjects was advice, which could signify an informal means of political participation. Ideally, the ruled were expected to provide it, and the ruler was expected to accept it. Given the power imbalance and the lack of institutionalised rules that could force the ruler to submit to the counsel of others, it required great sensibility and human wisdom from both sides – from those in power, it needed the capacity to accept critique; from the others, emotional intelligence, courage and manipulative skills. Literature like the *Book*, i. e., mirrors of princes, probably found a readership among courtesans and young officials who wanted to learn the correct behaviour at court, with all its intricacies, and acquire adequate knowledge, diplomacy and *paideia*, but also among young princes, who used it as preparation for their future as rulers. Exempla from Islamic and pre-Islamic rulers provided them with experiences of famous forerunners and with imitable models of virtue and abhorrent cases of failure.

Finally, it must be emphasised that the *Book of the Pearl of the Ruler*, though representative for early Islamic mirror literature, can only provide a partial view into medieval Islamic ideas of the ideal ruler. Arabic mirrors were mostly produced in courtly circles, i. e., by men whose *raison d'être* were their positions as advisors, so it does not come as a surprise that the topic of advice and wisdom was so central. They convey a different image from the good ruler – especially a considerably more grandiose conception of political authority<sup>36</sup> and a much greater exaltation of the ruler's persona – than the one that we might find in Islamic legal texts, principally focused on the caliph/ruler in his capacity as executive of the Islamic Law. The latter reflect the constitutional theory of government developed by Islamic '*ulamā*', who hereby fought for their own position in the long-lasting conflict of authority between them and the political body<sup>37</sup> and who had much less interest to enhance the ruler's dignity and power.

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<sup>36</sup> Louise Marlow, "Kings, Prophets and the Ulama in Medieval Islamic Advice Literature", *SI* 81 (1995), 101.

<sup>37</sup> Böwering (2015, cf. fn. 4) 27.